Effective Teaching in Large Classes

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Abstract

Large classes are a reality in Iraq and they pose particular challenges. People have varying opinions on how large the number of students should be in a so-called 'large class'. "There can be no quantitative definition of what constitutes a "large" class, as perceptions of this will vary from context to context" (Hayes, 1997:4). Some people hold that 50 would be large enough for a college class; others would argue that a large class could have as many as over 100 or even 150 students. However, most teachers generally agree that a class with 50-60 or more is 'large' enough. In this paper, a 'large class' refers to a college class with the number of students ranging from 60 to 150. Large classes present special challenges to the teacher. The two major educational challenges are that they make students feel anonymous and passive. Then, depending on how the teacher responds to these challenges, there may be second-level problems of class morale and discipline. In addition, the teacher faces inherent logistical problems, e.g., distributing and collecting homework, tests, handouts, posting grades, etc. To come over these problems, this research has been organized around a set of questions related to the two major educational challenges mentionend previously. They include:

- *What are the challenges of teaching a large class? And, how can the teacher respond to these challenges?*
- *How can the teacher develop good discipline in a large class?*
- *How can he encourage attendance in the large classes?*
- *How can he easily take attendance in the large classes?*
- *How can he develop the class exercises?*
- *How can he reduce the feeling of anonymity?*
- *How can he better manage the class climate?*
- *What can he do about exams?*
- *What kinds of active learning activities can he do?*
- *How can he improve his lectures?*
- *Miscellaneous Ideas*

Fortunately, there are ways to make large classes almost as effective as their smaller counterparts. Without turning himself inside out, the teacher can get students actively involved, help them develop a sense of community, and give frequent homework assignments without killing himself with impossible grading loads.

- ***What are the challenges of teaching a large class?***

The problems associated with teaching in large classes can be physical, psychological and technical. The teachers in large classes may feel physically weary; they may unwarily speak louder and move more often or longer distances than they do

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in small classes. Psychologically, some teachers feel it intimidating to face a large crowd of students, especially when they do not have much idea who their students are and what their students are expecting from them. To the teachers in large classes, students are not 'people' but 'faces'. Other problems such as monitoring attendance and checking assignments are also constantly worrying many teachers involved in large class teaching.

The problems with teaching in large classes can be summarized as the following (ibid: 6):

1. *Discomfort*: Many teachers worry about the physical constraints imposed by large numbers in confined classrooms. They feel unable to promote student interaction, since there is no room to move about. Some teachers also feel that teaching in large classes is physically very wearing.
2. *Control*: Some teachers feel worried by the discipline aspects of large classes. They feel they are unable to control what is happening, and that the classes become too noisy.
3. *Individual attention*: Many good teachers are concerned that they are neglecting the needs of their students as individuals.
4. *Evaluation*: Teachers feel a responsibility for checking all of their students' work.
5. *Learning effectiveness*: All teachers want their students to learn. They are understandably worried if they do not know who is learning what.

However, problems, such as these, are not impossible to be solved, or at least partially. In fact, what the teachers perceive as problems associated with large classes sometimes may not be so problematic to the students.

- ***How can the teacher respond to these challenges?***

The teacher has to make a decision about what course structure to use. There are four basic choices and each has its special challenge to making that option works effectively (Johnson, 2007: 1-2).

1. *Complete Lecture*: Keep the class as one large class, and keep the lecture as the main teaching/learning activity. The three big challenges here are (*a*) making the lecture very interesting, (*b*) finding ways to incorporate active learning, and (*c*) managing the logistics of papers, exams, grades, etc.
2. *Part Lecture/Part Breakout Sections*: In this option, the students meet part of the time as one large class and part of the time in smaller discussion or lab sections. This is the main idea of the communicative approach.
3. *All Multiple Sections*: In this option, there is no large lecture class, only multiple smaller sections, taught either by full-time faculty and/or teaching assistants. This has the benefit of smaller classes, which eliminates most of the problems of student anonymity and passivity. This can be noticed in the scientific specialties at laps.
4. *One Large Class, Structured Around Small Group Learning*: In this option, the class remains together as one large class, as in 'option 1'. Nevertheless, the dominant teaching/learning activity is carefully structured small group work, not lectures (Michaelsen, 2007: 2). This approach has several benefits: (*a*) it eliminates the problems of student anonymity and passivity, (*b*) minimizes the logistics challenge, and (*c*) keeps staffing costs at a minimum. It does require a teacher who knows how to use small groups and can solve the problems involved in using this in large-class settings.

Technically, teachers have to be capable of using microphones and data show properly to make their students hear and see clearly. Inadequate use of such classroom equipment may lead to the lack of interest and involvement of the students in the classroom learning.

- ***How can the teacher develop good discipline in a large class?***

The most prominent ways of developing good discipline in a large class are:

1. Establish a code of behaviour that is created by teacher and learners together. It should state clear basic rules of conduct that learners understand, such as; they have to work quietly; they may talk, but not loudly; and students who have finished the lesson tasks can read a book to keep them busy (Kunkam et al. , 2007: 2).
2. Use the environment and experiences outside the classroom (i.e. not only as much speech as possible but also as diverse a range of situations as possible) (Lyons, 1977: 250). It offers a new, different space when students get noisy or bored, and helps to reduce overcrowding.
3. Make the best use of the students' power saved from large class teaching. Teaching in large classes can minimize many human resources. In fact, careful and thorough planning of a lesson is the first step to the effective teaching in large classes.
4. Bring the teacher authority into full play and teach not only knowledge but also learning methods. Since students tend to listen to the teachers, and wait until they are being asked, even in small classes, the teachers of large classes can make their teaching more of a lecture based or transmission style. This does not mean that the teaching of learning method is more important than the teaching knowledge. Most teachers agree that telling the students how to fish is more important than merely giving them some fish, no matter how many fish they can give their students.
5. Collaborate with the students and build up a good learning atmosphere in large classes. Many students value the 'safe' learning atmosphere in large classes. Therefore, teachers of large classes should take advantage of this, and build up a collaborative and lively learning atmosphere. Xu (2007: 4) says in a research published in 2001 that many teachers held that a good class has an atmosphere of a feeling of warmth, mutual support, an absence of fear, a feeling of comfort, mutual respect, people mindful of other people's abilities and limitations, a feeling of cooperation, , and a feeling of trust, etc.
6. Take advantage of the size of the large classes. The teaching practice and experience of many who have ever been teaching in large classes show that it is not only possible to build up a good learning atmosphere in large classes, but also feasible to take advantage of the large class size. Large classes can be of great advantage throughout the following points (ibid: 5-6):
   a. The more students, the more ideas, and the more lively a class can be.
   b. The more students, the more interrelated and the more unified the class can be.
   c. The more students, the more competitive, and the more positively motivated the class can be. In the limited times of the students' being asked questions, only those few excellent students may always volunteer to answer them. However, these students set good examples to the other students.
7. Communicate, discuss and share regularly the classroom management techniques with other teachers who are involved in large class teaching (Richards and Rodgers,

2001: 156). Xu (2007: 5) holds that, "The teachers' skill in classroom management is the primary ingredient for success with group work in large classes."

- ***How can the teacher encourage attendance in the large classes?***

1. Make the class informative, interesting, and relevant to students' lives (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 156). Add variety/entertainment to lectures (animations, slide shows, video clips, recorders, guest speakers, etc.).
2. Use lots of supplemental illustrations/examples that students cannot get any other place other than in class.
3. Give lots of exam-directed problems in class.
4. Count class participation and quizzes toward the final grade.
5. Give students a topic to think about or a puzzle to solve for fun or for credit for the next class discussion.
6. Give more scheduled exams covering less material.
7. Give weekly in-class assignments that are related to the subject. This gives students the chance to apply what they have learned. Collect homework assignments, and give students credit for handing it in.
8. Convince students that exam success depends on attendance. Establish a policy that grades will be lowered according to the number of lectures missed.

- ***How can the teacher easily take attendance in the large classes?***

1. Have students sign in at the door.
2. Some instructors take attendance at the end of the session rather than at the beginning, so as to discourage students from signing in or being signed in and then leaving.
3. Taking attendance at irregular intervals may suffice, especially if there is a clear policy for lowering grades when absences are excessive.
4. Give a practice exam problem at end of lecture on scan sheets. This is both a way to take attendance and to test students' ability to apply key concepts.
5. Collect homework one week and return another; students must be present both times to get credit.
6. Pass a sheet of paper to the students asking them to write down their names then compare it with their daily homework papers to make sure of their precenss.

- ***How can the teacher develop the class exercises?***

Lectures as a rule have little educational value (Felder, 1997: 1). People learn by doing, not by watching and listening, as the new trends elaborate. If the teacher is teaching a small class and he is good, he may be able to prod many of his students into activity; get them asking and answering questions, discussing issues, challenging conclusions, laughing at his jokes, whatever. However, with large classes, no matter how good he is, he probably will not be able to persuade most students to open their mouths in front of 60 and more classmates; it feels too risky for them (ibid.). If the teacher hopes to move away from statue students to active students, the teacher has to choose deferent approach.

A technique he can count on is the in-class exercise. As the teacher lectures on a body of material or go through a problem solution, instead of just posing questions to the class as a whole and enduring the ensuing time-wasting silences, occasionally assign

a task and give the students anywhere from 30 seconds to 5 minutes to come up with a response. Anything can serve as a basis for these exercises, including the same questions he normally asks in lectures and perhaps some others that might not be part of his current repertoire (i.e. teaching).

Whichever approach the teacher uses for the exercises (individual, pairs, groups, or think-pair-share), at least some of the time he must call on groups or individuals to present what they came up with (Ali, 2001: 7). If he never does this, students will have little incentive to work on the exercises when he assigns them and many will not, but if they think, they may be called on, they will not want to be embarrassed and so he will get most of them actively involved in what he is teaching. Group exercises have the added benefit of giving students an opportunity to meet and work with one another, a good first step toward building a sense of community. He can augment this benefit by periodically asking the students to sit in different locations and work with students they have not been with before. The principal benefit of these exercises is that they get students acting and reflecting, the only two ways by which human beings learn.

The teacher can also use in-class exercises to wrap up a lecture period. He can ask the students to write down and hand in a brief statement of the main point of the lecture, or come up with two good questions or test problems related to what he just presented, or tell him how they think he can improve the class. He can scan their responses and quickly see if they got the main idea he is trying to present, identify their main points of confusion, or discover things he can do that will make the class better for them.

The teacher doesn't have to spend a great deal of time on active learning exercises in class; one or two lasting no more than 5-10 minutes in a 50-minute lecture can provide enough stimulation to keep the class with him for the entire period.

- ***How can the teacher reduce the feeling of anonymity?***
  1. The teacher must know the names of at least some of his students using different ways (see ' *How can the teacher easily take attendance in the large classes?*')
  2. He must create a more personal environment by letting students 'know' him in appropriate ways (his interests, how he first encountered a concept, and how he uses course-related materials in problem-solving, etc.) (Yule, 1996: 198).
  3. He can try to find ways to be accessible to students on a personal level using different strategies; arrive early and chat with students who are already there, greet students as they come in, stay a few minutes after class to answer individual questions, consider lecturing or leading discussion from different points of the classroom to give students the feeling of being in the midst of the action rather than simply being an observer, etc. (ibid.)
  4. When he asks questions, he can start on a personal level, asking students to share their own experiences with a concept, then move to the more abstract.

- ***How can the teacher better manage the class climate?***

1. The teacher can start on the first day of class by arriving at the classroom early; greeting students with a smile and making some comments when it feels comfortable and natural; sarting class on time and introducing himself and telling them something interesting about himself like, what got him interested in this subject in the first place. Leting students know what his personal teaching style is and how he likes to be treated, their responsibilities and his responsibilities, the grading system

for the course, and how assignments and projects will be assessed; and createing a first day experience that sets the tone for the rest of the term and leaves his students looking forward to the next class.

2. He can create an intimate climate by talking, not lectureing; reminding them frequently of his office hours, emphasizing that he is available to chat with students at those times; and when he covers an important concept, he must not say 'Any questions?' instead, he can say 'O.K., someone ask me a question about this concept from the last two rows.' This tells his class that he wants questions, and he will get them one way or another.
3. He must create a comfortable climate without letting the students run over him. He can lay out his expectations for student behavior in writing leting them know that if they are disruptive, that they can be dismissed from the class.
4. He has to give feedback to students, especially when he corrects a wrong answer or statement, as Ives (2007: 7) indicates:
   a. Useing a question as a respond. For example; 'Are you sure that …?' or 'What leads you to that conclusion?'
   b. Validating their thought process: 'Oh, I see. Comparing this sample with that sample, you might think there's a relationship here.'
   c. Stating what piece of information they did not take into account, or what implication they did not consider.
5. He must be honest with students regarding his inexperience as a teacher.
6. He have to remember that even quiet people can be excellent teachers. He doesn't have to be hilarious or extroverted to be a good teacher, he just need to be committed to their learning, enthusiastic, and knowledgeable.
7. He must take into account some of the differences between preparotory school and college students in planning and implementing his course. Students do not come to college with the requisite skills to be successful at this level. Their critical thinking skill can be weak. Students may not have developed good note taking skills. The teacher provides them with direction about what is important with his handouts, homework assignments, in class activities, and review sessions.

- ***What can the teacher do about exams?***

The teacher has to be aware of three main levels that must be dealt with carefully about exams (ibid: 9).

1. How can the teacher improve exam procedures in his class?

a. To help students prepare for mid-semester exams; the teacher gives short exercises that students work on in pairs in class. Solutions are discussed in the next lecture. These solutions are evaluated using a simplified grading system so that they can be compared with later test scores. Because there is a close correlation, students are motivated to attend class regularly and participate in the exercises.

b. Ask students at the end of class to write one exam question based on that day's lecture. This variation on the minute paper not only gives the instructor instant feedback but may also result in some good questions that could be included on the final exams.

c. The teacher can use short quizzes every lecture or every two lectures.

2. How does the teacher handle make-up exams/exam conflicts?

Here, the researcher gives four suggested ideas for handling the exam conflict, but there are other ways of handling them.

a. Establish exam policies that will accommodate students with legitimate conflicts or emergencies and provide strong disincentives to those who simply want to delay taking an exam.

b. One can give either a different exam after the regular exam or the same exam prior to the regular exam (same day, but earlier in the day).

c. Some instructors give no make-up exams but weight the final more heavily to make up the difference for those who have missed a big test.

d. The teacher can drop one exam, but cautions that he needs to have several exams to do so.

3. How can the teacher minimize cheating?

Although the researcher gives the following suggestions for minimizing cheating, there are many other ways to minimize it according to the type of the exam and the situation at that moment.

a. The teacher must set ground rules regarding the issue of cheating. The students must know the consequences cheating and the teacher must carry on the punishment.

b. The teacher can help the students to avoid cheating by talking about it at the beginning of the exam.

c. He must always be alert to new ways of cheating.

d. Other ways to minimize cheating is to make up different sheets of tests (Arce, 2007: 2). If the teacher made 2-3 different sheets of questions and handed them out carefully, it will make it almost impossible for a student to copy the work of another student.

e. Many teachers recommend using the essay form whenever possible in tests (Norman, 2007: 3).

f. When he assigns papers, he chooses a device for selecting topics that reduces the likelihood of students using previously written papers (Lowman, 1995: 281).

g. Assigning students to seats and separating friends. (Christopher, 2007: 3).

h. If necessary, he can get an additional person to proctor with him.

i. Making cheating 'not pleasurable' by taking action when it occurs this is the last resort, not the first.

- ***What kinds of active learning activities can the teacher do?***

1. Ask a question of the class requiring higher level thinking skills. Encourage students to think about a question and their answer for a couple of minutes. Volunteer groups then share their conclusions with the class.
2. Ask students to take out a sheet of paper and for one minute, summarize main points of lecture or note any muddy points of the lecture. Collect these and use feedback to target problem areas.
3. Give small problems/questions related to lecture in the middle of class and ask the students to discuss the answer(s) with their neighbors and then discuss them as a class (Ali, 2001: 37).

There are other activities that can be used inside the class according to the type of the class; scientific or humane class.

- ***How can the teacher improve his lectures?***

1. Remember the characteristics of some of the worst lectures that you had as a student and don’t do them. These might include; reading from the text or taking material straight from the assigned text only, 50 minutes of non-stop lecturing, outdated or incorrect information presented, etc.
2. If you have subjects or topics unavailable to the students in textbooks or other sources, you can distribute an outline and go through it on a transparency while you lecture.
3. Give students practice in remembering lecture material by asking questions from time to time or providing quizzes at the end of the lecture.
4. Try to provide hints or cues during the course of the lecture that students may use to remember important points.
5. Use examples and images when explaining concepts and principles.
6. Avoid non-stop lecturing: divide your lectures into short segments.
7. Try to be enthusiastic and expressive when lecturing.
8. Visual aids help a great deal. Try to mix up films, overheads, computer graphics, and even guest lecturers (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 156).
9. Encourage active participation by students during the course of the lecture. Have them work problems, answer multiple choice questions which are inserted periodically.
10. Tell students when they have responded correctly. If you ignore student responses you will tend to extinguish them altogether (Freeman, 1986: 129).
11. Before beginning the lecture, tell the students how it will be organized. A brief outline on the board at the beginning of class is an excellent means of helping students gear their thoughts to the topic for the day.
12. Avoid continuous note-taking by allotting special times for taking notes, providing lecture handouts, and so forth.
13. At the end of the class, summarize the important points which were covered during the lecture and give the students some idea of what to look forward to for the next time.

- ***Miscellaneous Ideas***

The teacher must remember that the previous elaborated points are not the best or only ways to teach and learn in large classes, but if he has not used these techniques before, he may want to try them with his class. Here, the researcher mentions other ideas that can be used for all specialties.

1. Plan a variety of activities when you have only one book.
2. Plan a group project in which each group member will have their own special task that is connected to the others. Members of every group must agree to do their own task and finish it by a certain date (ibid.).
3. Put your policies and procedures for grading, attendance, late homework, missed tests, etc., on the first day.

4. Learn as many of the students' names as you can. If the class is not too big, (60 and more) tell the students to sit anywhere they want to on the first day and remain there in subsequent classes.
5. If you hand out notes or provide a course pack, do not spend the lecture hours simply going over all the derivations or explanations for the students to follow along. You can guarantee put them to sleep like that. Instead, use the time to go over the conceptually difficult points, provide additional examples, fill in some of the gaps and answer some of the questions in the notes, and carry out some of the active learning exercises described earlier.

Conclusions

Teaching English in large classes is presently still not being preferred by most teachers. In other words, many teachers choose not to, but have to teach in large classes, because they take it for granted that many problems arise along with the increase in class size(1). However, there can be some positive sides in teaching large classes. On the one hand, teaching in large classes can reasonably save human and material resources to ease the problems caused by the lack of teaching staff. On the other hand, many renovations in teaching methodologies can be applied to large classes teaching just as well as to small classes. The large size of a class must not be an excuse of not improving on the traditional methods or not trying various other methods apart from the traditional ones. So long as the teachers know the characteristics of the teaching in large classes, and adjust what and how they teach accordingly, they can make their teaching just as effective as in small classes.

Notes

(1) Joyce et al. (2007: 1-2) tabulates the most suitable method for every teaching model that can be used with teaching large classes.

Teaching Models	Suitability for large classes	Methods for implementation
The social models These models emphasize our social nature and how social interactions can enhance academic learning. The social context in which knowledge is constructed is emphasized. The focus is on developing a community of learners, resolving conflicts, negotiating meanings and cooperating to complete set tasks.	Some of these methods may be difficult to implement practically in large lectures, although the use of these methods can be demonstrated. Better suited to small group sessions (lab, tutorial etc.).	• group investigations • role plays • jurisprudential inquiry • case studies • utilizing learning styles • cooperative learning
The information processing models The information processing (IP) models emphasize the development of the mind: namely reasoning and problem-solving skills. Teaching students how to think and learn is seen as a major goal. Students are encouraged to reason causally and master complex bodies of concepts by generating, analyzing, applying and evaluating information. The generation and use of analogies and metaphors is also common.	Some IP methods are difficult to implement in large lectures and are more suited to smaller groups.	• induction (data collection and hypotheses testing) • inferential/Socratic method
	Other IP methods can be used equally well with large groups as with smaller ones. May need to be modified or simplified for larger groups.	• concept attainment • mnemonics & metacognition • synectics • advanced organizers

The personal models These models see the student as central to his or her learning process. They emphasize the ways in which individuals create their own internal environment. Personality, self-esteem and self-concept are seen as crucial influences on learning. The goal is to enhance the mental and emotional health of students in order to generate learning needs and aspirations. The teacher is seen as a facilitator.	Impossible to fully implement in large lectures, however may be demonstrated in a modified or incomplete way; for example, the use of divergent and creative thinking exercises. Best suited to smaller groups (tutorials, etc) where one-to-one relationships can develop and activities can be monitored closely and followed through.	• student-teacher partnerships • non-directive work contracts • student-defined problem solving • modeling growth (and self-actualizing behaviours)
The behavioural models These models see students as a collection of learned behaviours. As such, behaviours can be learned and behaviours that do not work well can be 'unlearned'. These models also emphasize reinforcement schedules. Desired responses and behaviours need to be rewarded if they are to re-occur in students. Learning goals are generally individualized and discrete. Self-paced learning is valued and encouraged. Criteria for assessment and standards are rigid and objective.	Most suitable (and common) of all the models for large classes including large lectures. Excessive use of these models in small group work (tutorials, etc) is probably wasteful since it is important to use small group sessions to apply the other models. However, small group work may require some amount of direct instruction and training etc., especially in lab and practical situations.	• direct instruction • training & simulations • programmed instruction • self-instruction (e.g. self-paced study kits or workbooks)

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